

**Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on 'The role of women as drivers of a development and innovation model in agriculture and rural areas' (own-initiative opinion)**

(2012/C 299/06)

Rapporteur: **Ms Daniela RONDINELLI**

On 19 January 2012 the European Economic and Social Committee, acting under Rule 29(2) of its Rules of Procedure, decided to draw up an own-initiative opinion on

*The role of women as drivers of a development and innovation model in agriculture and rural areas.*

The Section for Agriculture, Rural Development and the Environment, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 26 June 2012.

At its 482nd plenary session, held on 11 and 12 July 2012 (meeting of 12 July), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 204 votes to 5 with 3 abstentions.

## 1. Conclusions and recommendations

1.1 The potential of women working and/or with a business in agricultural and rural areas should be analysed, recorded and promoted in all EU policies, and not penalised by some of them: this will lay the groundwork for women to become drivers of development and innovation, helping the entire sector to emerge from the crisis.

1.2 All EU legislation and programmes should ensure equal treatment, equal opportunities and measures to promote conditions for women through effective gender mainstreaming, simplifying procedures for accessing funds and periodically monitoring results.

1.3 Women should be involved in plans for the sector's development at local and regional level; they therefore need to be equipped with the skills to participate and to put across their needs, experiences and plans (capacity building).

1.4 Universities and research centres should collaborate with the women concerned in order to analyse potential and needs, provide training and technology to support the development of businesses run by women, and enhance women's work and life in the agricultural sector.

1.5 ICT<sup>(1)</sup> are essential for developing and improving women's agricultural activities, provided that they are effective, accessible and cheap (broadband) and have a good level of regional coverage. This can also create work for ICT technicians.

1.6 The establishment of women's networks (underpinned by good ICT) develops contacts, promotes participation and fosters personal relationships and the exchange of good practice between women in the EU and women in candidate and third countries, thus also furthering international cooperation and trade.

1.7 Training should target the needs and potential of the women concerned; the women themselves can be responsible for disseminating information using innovative methods (discussion and self-teaching groups, newspaper columns, training sessions in educational establishments, etc.).

1.8 To enable women to get organised and participate, thereby developing their potential, efficient, accessible and flexible services are needed which will free up their time from care duties. This applies to healthcare, transport, credit, distribution, marketing and care of the elderly and children, as well as social security to provide safeguards for women who do not have any. Here again, jobs will be created in the services concerned.

1.9 All Member States should promote legal recognition of assisting spouses so that they are covered for social security and healthcare. A legislative framework for joint rights of access should be established at EU level, possibly by means of a statute for women in agricultural and rural areas.

1.10 Women can help to make farming and their environment more sustainable if they are equipped with the necessary knowledge and technology (green technology, efficient management and use of resources, generation of clean energy). In order to kick-start this type of innovative and sustainable business, a fast-track scheme should be set up, granting streamlined access to resources (especially under the second pillar of the CAP).

1.11 Women can reinvigorate the crafts sector and traditional, high-quality, organic products, partly through closer collaboration between women producers and consumers, which needs to be studied and developed (as in the case of short supply chains).

1.12 The reform of the CAP and rural development policies must pull together to promote women's work and businesses, particularly by means of theme-based programmes for women (second pillar).

<sup>(1)</sup> Information and Communication Technologies.

1.13 Member States, regional and local authorities and the social partners have a shared responsibility to promote the potential of women living in agricultural and rural areas by ensuring that laws are respected and implementing an appropriate legal framework that guarantees the principle of gender equality and representation, including within their own institutions. Positive examples in some Member States should serve as an incentive to ensuring that women – as also called for by the European Parliament – are appropriately represented in all political, economic and social bodies in the agricultural sector and rural areas.

## 2. Potential which needs to be unlocked

2.1 Women's potential in agriculture and rural areas is underrated; the 2010 CAP report<sup>(2)</sup> refers to women only through Eurostat statistics, while the 2010 report on rural development refers in passing to the gap in labour market participation (76 % men, 62 % women<sup>(3)</sup>). Even the interesting *Council Decision of 20 February 2006 on Community strategic guidelines for rural development*<sup>(4)</sup> refers to women only in relation to the need to facilitate their access to employment.

2.2 On the other hand, the European Parliament, with its 2011 resolution on *The role of women in agriculture and rural areas*<sup>(5)</sup> gives an accurate list of the main issues facing women and proposes a number of strategic avenues to support them in their social and economic lives. The Committee endorses the EP's analysis and agrees with its conclusions, and would also draw attention to a series of opinions of its own<sup>(6)</sup>.

2.3 The Committee welcomes the Commission's proposal for a regulation setting out common provisions for the Structural Funds and the accompanying Commission staff working documents<sup>(7)</sup>, as well as the Communication on the European partnership on innovation in agriculture<sup>(8)</sup>. These documents include interesting points which give reason to hope that the institutions will pay closer attention to gender issues. The Committee hopes that they will be followed by appropriate Council decisions.

2.4 The EESC pays tribute to the activities of rural women's organisations and similar networks in a number of Member

States, which may be independent or integrated into farmers' associations. There are also some rural youth organisations that work very actively to promote gender equality. As a result, many women gain qualifications and are motivated to engage in other entrepreneurial, social, professional and political activities. They also have a large stake in the progress that has been achieved so far, such as in social security for farmer families. In some farmers' associations, which have traditionally been dominated by men, today women play a very influential role<sup>(9)</sup>. Cases like this should serve as an example in all Member States.

2.5 In parallel with the abovementioned texts, the present opinion aims to identify criteria and measures which can help women to unlock their potential as workers and entrepreneurs and drive innovation for sustainable development and good quality jobs. A clearer identification of the potential and needs of women in the workforce and in agricultural and rural entrepreneurship could raise and upgrade production, help to develop a strategic perspective, nurture diversification and make the CAP more consistent with rural development and territorial cohesion policies.

## 3. Data and points of reference

3.1 The successive CAP reforms have blurred the concepts of farming economies, rural economies and land management/development. This has created a larger field of study<sup>(10)</sup> in which to analyse the problems faced by women; it has also increased the need for accurate, disaggregated and qualitative data, building on the work already done by Eurostat. The EP's 2011 resolution states that there are 26,7 million people *working regularly in agriculture*, 42 % of whom (11,2 million) are women, including all agricultural and rural activities in which people are employed in any capacity (although this form of employment is often neither their sole nor their main job). Eurostat, meanwhile, measures agricultural employment on the basis of Annual Work Units (AWU), which brings the total number of men and women working in any capacity in the sector down to 11,1 million in 2010 (for agricultural, forestry, hunting and fishing activities); the total number of women employed would thus be around 4,7 million<sup>(11)</sup>.

3.2 This reference to statistical methods shows that the problem is important not because of the numbers involved, but because of the strategic nature of the agricultural and rural sector as it interacts with urban and peri-urban environments and their sustainable environmental and social development. The opinion will therefore consider the situation of women in agriculture and rural areas in the light of two

<sup>(2)</sup> Agriculture in the EU - Statistical and Economic Information - Report 2010, March 2011.

<sup>(3)</sup> Page 146, table 3.5.1.4. of the report.

<sup>(4)</sup> Decision No 2006/144/EC of 20 February 2006, programming period 2007 to 2013 – OJ L 55, 25.2.2006, p. 20.

<sup>(5)</sup> P7\_TA(2011)0122.

<sup>(6)</sup> These include opinions CESE, OJ C 256, 27.1.2007, p. 144-149, CESE, OJ C 317, 23.12.2009, p. 49, CESE, OJ C 347, 18.12.2010, p. 41, CESE, OJ C 376, 22.12.2011, CESE, OJ C 143, 22.05.2012, p. 35-39, CESE, OJ C 191, 29.06.2012, p. 116-129.

<sup>(7)</sup> COM(2011) 615 final/2 and staff working document 61 final, parts 1 and 2.

<sup>(8)</sup> COM(2012) 79 final.

<sup>(9)</sup> For example, the Federation of Swedish Farmers (LRF) is headed by a practising woman farmer.

<sup>(10)</sup> 92 % of the EU is considered to be rural and about 56 % of the population lives in rural areas, producing 45 % of the EU's added value (data given in the Council decision referred to in point 2.1).

<sup>(11)</sup> The Commission is preparing a series of reports and studies on this point. The Committee hopes that they will include still more accurate qualitative and disaggregated data.

aspects: the high level of production standards in European farming, and women's potential which can be tapped using limited, but effectively targeted resources. It will also be borne in mind that we are still in the grip of an acute crisis which is hurting – but also creating opportunities for – women living and working in agricultural and rural areas.

#### **4. The agricultural and rural economy and the effects of the crisis**

4.1 Recent data on the agricultural and rural situation show that, after a drop in production and employment triggered by the slow-down in consumption and exports, the sector is growing again, with a consequent increase in revenue. The internal market in particular has displayed a certain preference for quality and sustainability: for example, local produce ("zero food miles" or short supply chain <sup>(12)</sup>) and/or organic produce is increasingly popular among consumers.

4.2 As regards employment, between 2007 and 2008 around 900 000 jobs were lost in the agricultural sector, while between 2008 and 2009, the net loss was 200 000 AWU <sup>(13)</sup>. The downward trend in employment could thus settle at a level which reflects a natural drop in the number of workers owing to farm rationalisation, with fewer unskilled workers and more highly skilled workers.

4.3 Despite these reasons for optimism, the crisis is certainly not over nor have conditions for women improved. The female workforce, which already labours under serious disadvantages in both full-time (26 % of women against 52 % of men) and part-time employment (9,7 % of men against 11,8 % of women) <sup>(14)</sup>, is still employed informally in the bulk of agricultural production. Furthermore, in addition to these data, seasonal work (which accounts for a huge proportion of workers, with fewer permanent employees) and informal and illegal work are still a widespread and invisible or problematic and unquantified issue, which should be tackled by encouraging a switch from undeclared work to legal forms of employment and, as far as possible, by stabilising women's work.

4.3.1 The position of immigrant women (from inside and outside the EU) is very worrying; they are often denied the most basic rights, beginning with being paid late or with unjustified and unjustifiable reductions. This situation has deteriorated since the beginning of the crisis and cannot be justified by the difficulties encountered by small farms and processing businesses in accessing credit. There have thus been many cases of female workers who have had to return to their home country without being paid, or who have found themselves at the mercy of exploiters, criminals and labour traffickers who unfortunately cannot yet be prosecuted in some EU countries.

<sup>(12)</sup> See the conference on Local agriculture and short food supply chains (Brussels, 20 April 2012).

<sup>(13)</sup> Eurostat data.

<sup>(14)</sup> CAP 2010 report, table 3.5.1.4. ([http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/agrista/2010/table\\_en/index.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/agrista/2010/table_en/index.htm)).

4.3.2 As farms are scattered across a wide area and many of them are small, it can be difficult to check on employment conditions. However, careful management by local administrations, together with the social partners and civil society organisations, can be a springboard for combating anomalies and crime, guaranteeing rights and secure conditions for all.

#### **5. To improve women's living and working conditions in agricultural and rural areas ...**

5.1 The quality side of agricultural production is an important aspect of women's work, whether they are producers, assisting spouses, consumers or passers-on of authentic traditions, practices and creativity. In order to build on this situation, choices need to be made at local level.

5.2 The development and application of advanced production techniques, research, vocational guidance and training must involve research centres and universities interacting with agricultural and rural areas; this means including the needs of women and an analysis of their potential in their studies.

5.3 It is often thought that any problem involving improving quality and boosting competitiveness can be solved by means of some form of training. This may simply lead to more training programmes, rather than good-quality, targeted programmes, which often fail to respond suitably either to the specific needs of the economy and the stakeholders concerned or to jointly agreed sustainable development strategies. If it is to grow, the agricultural and rural sector needs properly equipped female workers and entrepreneurs, but training alone will not immediately upgrade work, business and life if the requisite structures and services are not in place and if sustainable, high-quality jobs are not created.

#### **6. ... analyse needs and potential at grassroots level**

6.1 Any form of training, provision of services or rationalisation must be rooted in an analysis of the conditions and resources of the women who live and work in agricultural and rural areas. This will entail careful analysis of the region and the potential and expectations of the people living there, which will require the active participation of the women concerned. Participation is a process in which national, local and regional authorities and socio-occupational organisations all take their share of responsibility. The overall potential of a region can be increased by unlocking the potential of the women living there. Targeted and effective programmes to develop innovation, entrepreneurship and employment among women can create jobs (especially for young people), curbing and sometimes even reversing the rural exodus.

6.1.1 Universities and the region itself need to collaborate in analysing this potential: research centres should be involved in planning and assessing development plans. This means that

effective links, using advanced and accessible ICT, need to be guaranteed between universities and the women involved, in order to conduct and test detailed research at grassroots level<sup>(15)</sup>.

6.1.2 Regional development plans should include specific training schemes for female workers, assisting spouses and female entrepreneurs, building on their ability to adapt, innovate, and pass on knowledge and good practices. Women who have undergone training should be encouraged to pass the knowledge gained on to other women through formal mechanisms (cooperatives, bodies involved in local-authority decisions, rural development action groups, etc.) and informal mechanisms (discussion and self-tuition groups, training sessions in educational establishments, radio and TV programmes, newspaper columns, social enterprises, etc). Incentives here will involve freeing up women's time by providing assistance and good local services (paid leave, childcare facilities, efficient and free transport<sup>(16)</sup>, supplying stand-ins for any care duties, farm crèches, etc.), as well as financial incentives.

6.2 Efficient, high-speed (broadband) and cheap internet coverage is a prerequisite, given that in some Member States less than 60 % of households have an internet connection. More widespread use of ICT can also help with home study and communication between geographically distant areas and encourages communication with women in agricultural and rural sectors in other countries, fostering interest in studying languages and experience-swapping.

6.2.1 ICT also provide the means to establish networks of women entrepreneurs, assisting spouses and women workers who, spurred by the presence of migrants from outside the EU, also communicate and collaborate with women from candidate and third countries. This can result in a fruitful exchange of experience, improved development cooperation and greater trade integration, as well as helping solve the global food challenge.

6.3 Women's health in agricultural and rural areas is a priority. Effective healthcare services (including medical advice and diagnosis given remotely) and high-quality medical equipment must monitor health and safety and occupational diseases in the workplace; this can also create jobs for specialised staff. These services (particularly reproductive healthcare and gynaecological check-ups) should be provided free of charge; at any rate, the fees should always be in line with the woman's income and family situation. A key aspect is the presence of many older women: life expectancy in some of the more rural countries is much longer for women than for

men, and so women predominate in the over-60s category<sup>(17)</sup>. Medical, assistance and support services are essential for this category of women, partly so that younger women do not have to take on additional family burdens.

6.4 Assisting spouses in the agriculture sector continue to be treated very differently from one country to the next. They are not formally recognised as workers (despite the fact that they work very hard in this sector) and in some Member States still have no access to any form of healthcare or pension provision (except for universal coverage where provided by social security). Mechanisms need to be set up to ensure coverage for these women, for example through specific pension funds promoted by the social partners or the local and regional authorities. Rules for joint rights of access should be established, possibly by means of a European statute for women in agricultural and rural areas.

6.5 Women are key players in the rational use of energy and waste disposal as they manage the family economy. Sorting waste for recycling and proper facilities for composting and processing (biomass) can go hand in hand with energy saving targets and virtuous cycles of agricultural and organic production which is self-sufficient in terms of energy. Access to new green production technologies and the efficient use of resources should be facilitated, with specific incentives offered to farms and businesses run by women.

6.6 In many countries, groups of women have launched worthwhile initiatives in agri-tourism, particularly involving cooperatives, and have managed them very successfully. In view of the growing interest in this type of tourism, a network of businesses in this sector should be formed and best practice shared.

6.7 In order to contribute to sustainable development and the activities undertaken by women (often on small plots), the distribution sector needs to perform well and be efficient and flexible: local distribution cooperatives with low overheads could foster the sale of more affordable, high-quality local products. One-off events promoting these products have also proven useful.

6.8 It is important to promote local crafts which are being lost. Targeted information and marketing campaigns can help maintain or create businesses and jobs, stemming the rural exodus and the drop in quality brought about by large-scale

<sup>(15)</sup> Many large agricultural and rural areas do not have universities or research facilities; it is interesting to note the decision to establish a university in Umeå (Sweden) in a rural, undeveloped area which was revitalised when the study and research centre became fully operational.

<sup>(16)</sup> The Staff Working Document, part 2 (referred to in footnote 7), points out that women use public transport more than men.

<sup>(17)</sup> In Lithuania, women live for an average of 11 years longer than men; in Latvia, for 10 years; in Poland, Romania and Slovakia, for 8 years; and in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Portugal, Slovenia and Spain, for 7 years.

imports. Effective interaction between suitable services, technologies and transport is therefore imperative in order to link up rural and agricultural areas with urban markets <sup>(18)</sup>.

6.9 Access to credit for setting up agricultural and crafts businesses and cooperatives needs to be improved, giving more responsibilities to traditional-style banks (especially agricultural credit unions and local savings banks) and promoting microcredit programmes aimed primarily at women.

## 7. EU policies and the role of civil society

7.1 Pending the adoption of the proposed regulation setting out common provisions for the Structural Funds <sup>(19)</sup>, it should be pointed out that the EAFRD Regulation stresses the need to use the fund's resources to promote equality between men and women and includes provisions for informing and involving bodies which pursue this goal <sup>(20)</sup>. The new common regulation could be reinforced with the introduction of a fast-track scheme for women engaged in setting up innovative and sustainable agricultural, rural or crafts businesses. This would give civil society organisations involved in the partnership referred to in Article 6 of the regulation greater weight and increase their power of initiative.

7.2 With regard to the proposed common regulation on the Funds, which has already been considered in an EESC opinion <sup>(21)</sup>, the Committee reiterates that it is very concerned about the potential impact of macroeconomic conditionalities (Article 21) on projects involving initiatives geared towards women. The Committee calls for the inclusion of specific provisions to avoid harming, directly or indirectly, the most vulnerable members of society, including women.

7.3 In addition to the abovementioned proposals, the Committee calls on the Commission to react more quickly to the changing conditions and requirements experienced by

women, and above all to ensure that programmes promoting the role of women in agricultural and rural areas are not overly rigid in terms of content and approach.

7.4 Stronger and improved participation by women in agricultural and rural development should be mainstreamed in European programmes for research and development, training (European Social Fund, etc.) and labour mobility, and of course in the implementation of economic, social and territorial cohesion policy.

7.5 The provisions, programmes and projects implementing the second pillar should be monitored periodically as part of the CAP monitoring procedures to ensure that they are effective in pursuing equal opportunities and in the appropriate use of resources.

7.6 Rural development policies should include theme-based sub-programmes for women, and experience with the Leader initiative should be built on and circulated.

7.7 In order to develop programmes which make tapping women's potential a priority, the region (in the physical, administrative and sociological meaning of the term) must be the number one player in an interactive process. The social partners and civil society organisations must take a share of direct responsibility for making and enacting choices. In order to do this they also need to demonstrate that they are capable of representing women's needs practically and effectively and of integrating women into organisations at every level, with due focus on capacity building for women.

7.7.1 The Committee calls on all the organisations represented within it to focus keenly on women who work and live in agricultural and rural areas, passing on their needs and aspirations and systematically including them in the various horizontal and vertical partnership bodies.

Brussels, 12 July 2012.

*The President*  
of the European Economic and Social Committee  
Staffan NILSSON

<sup>(18)</sup> CESE, OJ C 143, 22.05.2012, p. 35-39, examines the situation of crafts in rural areas.

<sup>(19)</sup> COM(2011) 615 final/2.

<sup>(20)</sup> See Council Regulation 1698/2005 of 20 September 2005 (OJ L 277, 21.10.2005, pp. 1-40), Articles 6(1)c); 62(1)b) and 76(2)a).

<sup>(21)</sup> CESE, OJ C 191, 29.06.2012, p. 30-37, particularly point 3.3.3.